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SUBJECT: Special Media Reaction: Further Reaction to Ambassador's January 10 Speech to the American Chamber of Commerce on Peace Process

REFS: A) Colombo 0054 B) Colombo 0072 C) Colombo 0089

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The Sri Lankan media over the holiday weekend continued to analyze the Ambassador's January 10 speech to the American Chamber of Commerce in which he expressed grave concern over LTTE violence and predicted the Tigers would face a stronger Sri Lankan military if they chose to abandon the Ceasefire Agreement. English and Sinhala media praised the statement but questioned its effectiveness, highlighting offers of U.S. military assistance. Independent Tamil media claimed the Ambassador had overlooked abuses against Tamils by the Security Forces. The enduring reaction in the local media to a speech with little new content reflects the tense atmosphere prevailing now in the country, with observers focusing intently on the words of the international community. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Commentators in the government-owned media continued to express support for the Ambassador's statement, but inquired whether the LTTE would take it to heart. The President's Media Advisor and veteran commentator Lucien Rajakarunanayake, in his weekly "On my watch" column (1/14), argued the LTTE had not, and would not, heed the message: "The latest warning, the toughest of its kind so far, has come from the United States Ambassador to Sri Lanka Jeffery Lunstead... The U.S. Ambassador's assurance about training provided to the Sri Lankan armed forces may give some satisfaction to those harboring doubts about the capability or preparedness of the Sri Lankan security forces to face up to the tactics and the vast fire power of the LTTE, but that is a small comfort in the current context." Rajakarunanayake contended repeated LTTE attacks following tough statements by the international community are "a bloody reminder of the contempt the LTTE attaches to such warnings."

¶3. (U) Similarly, in the government-owned Sunday Observer (1/15) an op-ed titled "Government withstands provocative attacks," an unidentified "Special Defense Correspondent" argued the LTTE attack on a Naval bus on January 12 "looks like a tit for tat act against the United States warning the LTTE on the previous day... Prabhakaran's decisions in defiance of America's warning are the best evidence for the international community to judge the LTTE's terrorism and non-commitment towards peace through negotiation... [The attack] would no doubt open the eyes of the Co-Chairs including the United States to understand that the LTTE's sole aim is not freedom for the Tamils, but terrorism."

¶4. (U) Mainstream independent English media drew attention to the seeming Tiger contempt for the international community's warnings against continued violence. Daily Mirror (01/17) columnist Thanuka expressed concern about an editorial appearing on an unspecified pro-LTTE website that argued in response to Ambassador Lunstead's statement, "The LTTE cannot be threatened by words or deeds. The LTTE fought the Indians 18 years ago. Just stop and think how far the LTTE has militarily progressed and what progress the Sinhalese have made in that period." Thanuka contended not only would the LTTE ignore U.S. warnings, but that it would express spite against them.

¶5. (U) The Sinhala nationalist press ranted against the LTTE but also chastised the United States and the international community for not doing more to pressure the Tigers. The editors of the independent Island (01/14), in an editorial titled "Slapping Uncle Sam," argued, "Foreign powers may see an opportunity in Sri Lanka's conflict for them to pursue their hidden agendas in the region. The defiance of the LTTE stems not from its capability to take on the US or any of its allies. Instead it stems from the [LTTE's] confidence that whatever it does, they will not go to the extent of helping Sri Lanka militarily." The editorial continued, "The LTTE is running an academy of terrorism, training terrorists in other countries like the Maoist guerillas in Nepal. The way it is running rough shod over the US and other foreign powers must be inspiring to the terror-minded in the world. Even bin Laden must think he

has a lesson to learn from the LTTE... It is time for the Co-Chairs to tell the world whether they are for the sovereign state of Sri Lanka or the LTTE. President Bush told the world after the 9/11 attacks, 'either you are with us or with them [terrorists]!' Now that the LTTE has asked the US to go to hell, the Co-Chairs must make up their minds what to do with the LTTE." The Sinhala-language Diviana, sister paper to the Island, ran a very similar editorial, arguing, "Mr. Ambassador, you should be better informed. The Tigers respond only with bullets and Claymore mines. Don't waste your words on their behalf."

16. (U) The independent Sinhala press exaggerated the United States' intention to provide resources and engagement to the Sri Lankan forces if the LTTE decides to return to war. Independent Sinhala Sunday Lakkima (01/15) quoted political affairs analyst Mohan Samaranayake contending "The U.S. has shown the Tigers that if they won't cease their violence the US is ready to control them." Independent Sinhala Sunday Lankadeepa (sister paper to the mainstream Sunday Times and Daily Mirror) claimed: "America's warning sets example to other countries too. We salute the American Ambassador who emphasized the US is not prepared to mollycoddle the Tigers. Now the other countries also should speak up for peace. All should realize the LTTE poses a danger to the region and the world."

17. (U) Independent Tamil media harped on the Sinhala press's emphasis on U.S. military assistance against the Tigers. Independent Tamil daily Thinakkural (1/14) carried a statement by the Buddhist monk-led, Sinhala nationalist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) stating: "The U.S. must assist Sri Lanka with arms and training of our military." In the Sunday Thinakkural (1/15), Tamil defense analyst Vidhuran (pseudonym) contended: "At a time the country's security situation is weak, U.S. Ambassador Jeffrey Lunstead's statement raises doubts whether the chances for peace talks are fading. By implying the United States would support the Sri Lanka Military in a war against the LTTE, the Ambassador may not have realized his words could jeopardize chances for peace talks and cripple Norway's efforts. America has failed to realize that Tamil civilians are killed everyday in the North and East by the security forces in retaliation to the grenade attacks on them. The Sinhala and English media give maximum publicity to attacks on the security forces [and] try to pin the killings of innocent Tamils onto the LTTE." Flagship Tamil paper, Virakesari (1/15) also emphasized the promise of U.S. military support in an op-ed, arguing: "U.S. Ambassador Jeffrey Lunstead's speech has made the government and the Sinhala extremists happy. He has confirmed the U.S. government would provide training and military assistance to the Sri Lankan forces but has said very little about the peace process."

18. (U) Pro-LTTE media emphasized Foreign Minister Managala Samaraweera's alleged failure in Washington to blacklist the Tigers and misconstrued the Ambassador's strongly worded speech. In an op-ed titled, "India and the U.S. trying hard to stop the resumption of war," pro-LTTE Tamil daily Sudar Oli (1/16) political analyst M. Thirunavukarasu argued: "The U.S. did not promise anything big when Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera visited the U.S. Then, the U.S. Ambassador made a speech the day after the attack on the SL Navy boat that killed 13 soldiers. The Ambassador made three important contentions in his speech, but the Sinhala and English media prioritized only one issue out of the three. That is that the LTTE would have to face stronger Lankan forces. But the Ambassador also mentioned 'what kind of leaders are those who oppose the rights and aspirations of its people' and aiming his comments at President Mahinda Rajapakse." (Note: In the speech, the Ambassador questioned the leadership of the LTTE. End note)

19. (SBU) Comment: As in previous commentary, English and Sinhala media argued the Ambassador's warnings to the Tigers were toothless in the face of the organization's intransigence. Sinhala and Sinhala nationalist media over-emphasized the promise of U.S. military support. Tamil and pro-LTTE media decried this misrepresentation by sections of the pro-Sinhala press, but polarized the issue with distortions, including redirecting the Ambassador's criticism of the LTTE's lack of responsible leadership to President Rajapaksa. Among the Tamil press, the speech generated defensive Op-Ed's and letters to the editor arguing the U.S. statement, while correctly denouncing violence, overlooked legitimate grievances of the Tamil population. The enduring and sharp reaction to the Ambassador's speech is interesting given that the address contained nothing new in terms of U.S. policy or attitudes. However, the current tense climate and daily attacks have heated up the war of words as well, and media pundits are looking closely at what the U.S. says and does. End Comment.